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**Derek Chollet. *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*.** New York: Public Affairs, 2016). ISBN: 9781610396608 (hardcover, \$26.99/CDN\$34.99); 9781610396615 (eBook, \$17.99/CDN\$22.99).

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## Introduction by Hal Brands, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

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It is hard to think of anyone better qualified to write an early history of Barack Obama's foreign policy than Derek Chollet. For over six years, Chollet served the Obama administration with distinction, in senior positions at the State Department, White House, and Defense Department. He is also an accomplished author who has written numerous well-regarded books on the history of American foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Chollet's most recent book is *The Long Game: How Barack Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*. It is a lively and insightful insider's account that, in the time since its publication in 2016, has proven as controversial and thought-provoking as Obama's statecraft itself.

The basic thesis of Chollet's book is conveyed in the title—that Barack Obama pursued a prudent, thoughtful grand strategy aimed at preserving American power for “the long game.” That strategy encountered its share of difficulties during Obama's eight years in office, Chollet allows, on issues from Middle-East strategy to dealing with a rising China in the Asia-Pacific. But on balance, he believes, it must be deemed significantly more successful than not, and it offers a model for future leaders who seek to go beyond sound-bites and grapple deeply with the challenge of protecting U.S. interests in an increasingly competitive environment. Chollet's book thus joins an already vibrant debate on Obama's grand strategy, one that has featured a wide range of assessments—from the highly positive to the sharply critical—of the 44<sup>th</sup> president's statecraft.<sup>2</sup>

The reviews in this roundtable reflect that diversity of opinion. Mary Sarotte deems the book “accessible and engaging,” and offers only a few self-described “quibbles” about the book's structure, focus, and flow. Ronald Krebs largely agrees with Chollet's assessment of Obama, which he lauds as “as good a contemporary history of Obama's foreign policy as we are likely to get.” He argues, like Chollet, that the defining features of Obama's presidency—his prudence, his skepticism about the use of force, his attention to costs and limits—were more deserving of praise than many observers recognized at the time, and he praises key administration achievements such as the Iran nuclear deal. Patrick Porter is also broadly positive in his assessment, although he does offer a significant critique—that Obama was not as revolutionary a president as Chollet claims, and that he merely tweaked the American foreign policy tradition rather than significantly changing it.

Robert Kaufman, by contrast, offers a starkly negative assessment of both the book and Obama. He argues that Chollet glosses over key errors and missteps of Obama's foreign policy, and that the President fundamentally failed to deal with the many emerging threats that characterized his presidency, from Russian revisionism to Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea to the terrifying rise of the Islamic State of Iraq

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008); Derek Chollet, *The Road to the Dayton Accords: A Study of American Statecraft* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> See, variously, Robert Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016); Mark Moyar, *Strategic Failure: How President Obama's Drone Warfare, Defense Cuts, and Military Amateurism Have Imperiled America* (New York: Threshold, 2015); Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Gideon Rose, “What Obama Gets Right,” *Foreign Affairs* 94:2 (March/April 2015); Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic* 316:3 (April 2016); Hal Brands, “Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 39:4 (Winter 2017).

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and Syria (ISIS). In his response, Chollet offers his thoughts on some of the critiques offered by the reviewers, and further reflects on Obama's place in the history of American foreign policy.

There are many interesting themes that run throughout the roundtable, but two deserve particular attention here. The first is the question of how much Obama really changed American foreign policy. Chollet, contrasting Obama to his predecessors (particularly George W. Bush), argues that the change was rather profound, and that the President repeatedly bucked Washington's conventional wisdom on issues such as the use of force in the Middle East. Porter, and also Krebs, assess Obama against the longer arc of American statecraft, and ask how much he really changed. Obama, in their view, altered the tactics of American grand strategy, but not much more than that.

Second, how much blame does Obama deserve for the emergence of a world that has become increasingly messy in recent years? Critics such as Kaufman have argued that U.S. policies magnified the impact of—and may have even caused—disadvantageous changes in the international environment. Chollet would not dispute that the world has become an increasingly difficult place for America. But he contends that Obama did about as well as possible in dealing with the weak hand and challenging situation he inherited. These issues are certain to dominate debates over Obama's foreign policy for years to come. It seems certain that Chollet's important and thoughtful book will be at the center of those debates.

### Participants:

**Derek Chollet** is executive vice president and senior advisor for security and defense policy at The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF). During the Obama Administration he served at the State Department, White House, and Pentagon, most recently as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. He is a contributing editor to *Foreign Policy*, where he coedits "Shadow Government," and is a regular contributor to *Defense One*. He is also an adjunct senior research scholar at Columbia University's Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies.

**Hal Brands** is Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. His most recent book is *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump*, to be published in January 2018.

**Robert G. Kaufman** is the Dockson Professor of Public Policy at Pepperdine University. He is the author of four books, including his most recent *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy has Weakened America* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2016). He has published frequently in scholarly journals and the realm of commentary, including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and *Fox News*.

**Ronald R. Krebs** is Beverly and Richard Fink Professor in the Liberal Arts and Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. He is the author most recently of *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), which received the 2016 Robert L. Jervis and Paul W. Schroeder Best Book Award in International History and Politics and the 2016 Giovanni Sartori Book Award, for the best book developing or applying qualitative methods, from the American Political Science Association, as well as an honorable mention for the Joseph S. Leggold Book Prize from Georgetown University. Krebs is co-editor of "Rhetoric & Grand Strategy," a special issue of *Security Studies* (2015), co-editor of *In War's Wake: International Conflict and the Fate of Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), and author of

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*Fighting for Rights: Military Service and the Politics of Citizenship* (Cornell University Press, 2006). He currently sits on the editorial boards of *Security Studies* and the *Journal of Global Security Studies*.

Professor **Patrick Porter** is the Academic Director of the Strategy and Security Institute at the University of Exeter. He is writing a book about Britain's war in Iraq.

**Mary Elise Sarotte** is Dean's Professor of History at the University of Southern California. She is the author or editor of five books, including most recently *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall* (Basic Books, 2014), and *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton University Press; 2009), both *Financial Times* Books of the Year.

Review by Robert G. Kaufman, Pepperdine University

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Credit Derek Chollet for his fealty to his former boss. In an age when political memoirs commonly savage the President whom the writer served, Chollet, in *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*, makes a full-throated case for the Obama Administration's controversial foreign policy. Chollet—the author of several well regarded books on U.S. foreign policy and formerly a senior official in the Obama Administration—defies the crystallizing perception even among some on the liberal side of spectrum that President Barack Obama will leave the United States weaker and more vulnerable than it was eight years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Chollet largely exonerates Obama from blame on what Chollet admits are the “astonishing diversity of threats” unfolding in the final years of his Presidency—“the disintegration of Syria and the rise of ISIS.... The chaos of post-Qaddafi Libya and the turmoil in Egypt.... Russian Intervention in Ukraine and its resurgence as a military threat in Europe, an increasingly authoritarian, arrogant China that “bullies its neighbor” and “invests significantly in its military modernization prioritizing capabilities to undermine America’s military advantage” (x). Though acknowledging that the President and his administration have made foreign policy mistakes, Chollet argues—embracing Obama’s ‘ports metaphor’ and thereby dubiously imputing the President with superior clairvoyance—that in history’s long game, the Obama era will represent a definite win. “We have good reason to be confident ... as Obama’s Presidency comes to an end,” Chollet assures us. “America’s global position is sound. It has restored a sense of strategic solvency. Countries look to the US for guidance, ideas, support and protection. The US again is admired and inspiring, not just for what it can do abroad, but for its economic vitality and strong society at home” (229). Whereas virtually all of Obama’s critics from the conservative internationalist side of the spectrum remonstrate the President for spurning traditional conceptions of American exceptionalism, Chollet argues to the contrary. President Obama is, according to him, a “champion of American exceptionalism ... who upholds with every fiber of his being” (xvi).

Chollet assesses Obama’s legacy glowingly as “enduring and largely positive on the issue that matter most:” how “and where America uses military force, how the US approaches its enemies and works with its partners, and how America should conceive of its power and exert its leadership” (xiii). He identifies eight core tenets of Obama’s long-game strategy: “balance, sustainability, restraint, precision, patience, fallibility, skepticism, and exceptionalism.” Chollet gives Obama high marks for achieving balance among America’s many interests around the world, ensuring that U.S. foreign policy is sustainable, vindicating Obama’s embrace of “restraint...precision, and patience in choosing ends and means. Chollet also commends Obama for his willingness to admit America’s “fallibility, thereby avoiding mistakes and earning respect. Chollet commends Obama likewise for his broader notion of strength similar to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s definition of smart power. Instead relying on vague promises of toughness, the rhetoric of resolve, and an excessive propensity to use force, Obama wisely used all of the United States’ assets “diplomatic, economic, and military—to build a global coalition” to solve problems (231).

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008); Derek Chollet and Samantha Powers, *The Unquiet American: Richard Holbrooke in the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

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Even when events largely demolished the Obama Administration's expectations—the 'reset' with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the dynamics of the Arab Spring, engagement with China, the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, the metastasizing Syrian Civil War, Chollet calls "the greatest catastrophe of the post-Cold war," his defense of the President remains undaunted. Chollet praises Obama for always choosing the least bad strategic and moral alternative, reflecting the President's sensible balance of competing interests and a healthy recognition of limits. Chollet claims, in this vein, that Obama ended up achieving an even better deal in Syria through diplomacy and backing down on the enforcement of his red line after Assad's use of chemical weapons rather than using force robustly (19-26).

Chollet falls, too, into a miniscule and diminishing cohort—excluding Clinton or Robert Gates, Obama's first Secretary of Defense—praising the President's handling of Putin despite the advice of almost every one of his senior officials in a dovish Administration to respond more vigorously to Putin's systematic campaign to undermine Ukraine's independence. As Chollet sees it, Obama wisely calibrated the steps taken against Russia, to reassuring and bolstering the United States' NATO partners in a way that is balanced and sustainable, while providing Putin an off-ramp to deescalate the confrontation (175). Chollet also deems Obama's pivot to Asia a significant if provisional success, a "strategic shift positioning the U.S. for the future, yet "another component of Obama's" successful "effort to build a strategy for the long term—a reset to repair America's image and reestablish its leadership position (61). Finally, Chollet lauds the 2015 Iran deal for contributing mightily to thwarting Iran's nuclear ambitions. As he sees it, too, "the Iran agreement exemplifies" what Obama's "Long Game foreign policy looks like" (201).

Caveat emptor that this writer has recently published *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America*, a book that assails what I call President Obama's 'Dangerous Doctrine' for jettisoning the venerable tradition of muscular internationalism largely regnant among U.S. Presidents since World War II, the dismal first three years of Jimmy Carter's administration being the dismal exception.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, readers may wish to consult *Dangerous Doctrine* for a full and fair assessment of which book has the better of the argument. For brevity's sake, this review will comment selectively on *The Long Game*, starting with the rare points of convergence. The President is not only the driving force of his foreign policy, but also typically the most dovish member of his Administration. Indeed, the Iran agreement also represents the distilled essence of the Obama Doctrine, though this writer considers that to be a criticism rather than a compliment.

Chollet's mix of variables, and his nomenclature to describe them, obscure rather than illuminate the essence of Obama's 'Dangerous Doctrine.' The Obama Doctrine—which the President has followed with remarkable fidelity since 2009—often treats the so-called arrogance of American power as a greater danger to the U.S. than the threats emanating from its ideological enemies and geopolitical rivals. It appropriates the worst features of classical realism, neorealism, and liberal multilateralism, while discarding these paradigms' countervailing virtues.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robert G. Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakens America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-26.

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Like neorealism, the Obama doctrine wrongly underplays the importance of ideology and regime type in determining friends, foes, threats, and opportunities. This conceptual error accounts largely for the President's serial, serious errors in dealing with Putin's authoritarian, arrogant Russia which seeks to reconstitute some form of empire across Central Europe, an authoritarian revisionist China seeking hegemony rather than stability in the world's most important power center of the twenty-first century, and virulently anti-American radical Islamist regimes, entities, and parties in the Middle East such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and a revolutionary virulently anti-American Iran.<sup>4</sup>

Like liberal multilateralism, the Obama Doctrine overrates the efficacy of international institutions as arbiters of legitimacy, while unduly discounting the imperatives of traditional geopolitical rivalries and the benefits of American military preeminence, which the Administration's improvident and unnecessary defense cuts have dangerously undermined. The President's aversion to risk—what Chollet commends as precision and restraint—often magnifies dangers because he focuses almost exclusively on the cost of action—be it dealing with Russia, China, Iran, or Syria—, and remains oblivious to the often-greater cost of inaction.<sup>5</sup>

Nor, contrary to Chollet's claim, has Obama succeeded in ensuring the sustainability of American foreign policy. On the contrary, the President spends too little on defense as measured by historic standards, and too much on his sweeping domestic agenda, creating massive debt, impeding growth, raising tax burdens, robbing national defense to pay for it, and discouraging innovation and wealth creation. Obama has presided over the most anemic recovery from a recession in U.S. history, defining deviancy down, with the U.S. growth rate barely exceeding 2 percent annually.<sup>6</sup> By the reckoning of Former Secretary of the Treasury and State George Shultz, who knows something about robust recoveries, the Obama Administration's voracious increases in entitlements—including the bloated, ill-advised, staggeringly expensive Obamacare that is in danger of imploding—risk making an eminently avoidable American decline a self-fulfilling prophecy, putting the United States on the perilous path to becoming a Western European style-social democracy at the very moment when that model is proving unsustainable even there. Instead of facilitating sustainability, as Chollet argues, Obama's improvident social and economic programs instead imperil the American economic renewal on which the robustness of American hard power depends.<sup>7</sup>

Worse, the Obama Administration has subordinated defense spending to the President's paramount objective of enlarging the size, cost, and scope of government at home. Facing soaring budget deficits and anemic economic growth, the Obama Administration has slashed defense spending. The defense budget as a percentage of federal spending has fallen to 15 percent under President Obama compared to 52 percent under President John F. Kennedy and 29 percent under Ronald Reagan. Obama's defense budget for 2015 shrinks

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 184-187.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Morath, "Seven Years Later, the Recovery Remains the Weakest of the Post-World War II Era," *Wall Street Journal*, 29 July 2016, <http://www.blogs.wsj.com/economics/2016/07/29/seven-years-later-recovery-remains-weakest-of-the-post-world-war-ii-era/>.

<sup>7</sup> George P. Shultz, "How to Get America Moving Again," *Wall Street Journal*, 8 August 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/george-p-schutz-how-to-get-america-moving-again-14097536979>.

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the Army to its smallest levels since before World War II. If the Obama Administration has its way, the Navy will shrink to its smallest level of major surface ships since before World War I—less than half of Reagan’s 600-ship navy. The Obama Administration also has assigned low priority for research, development, and procurement of cutting-edge technology and weapons systems, including ballistic missile defense.<sup>8</sup> By any reasonable measure, the United States can well afford to spend 4 or 5 percent of the GDP on national defense, a prudent investment on freedom insurance. Yet the sequester measure, which the Obama Administration proposed and Congress passed, threatens to constrain defense spending even further, as China and Russia continue to increase their defense spending steeply and their weapons buildup prodigiously—with the aim of negating U.S. advantages. By 2023, defense spending will decline to 2.8 percent of the GDP with sequester or roughly 3 percent of the GDP without it—a figure lower as a percentage of GDP than what the United States spent in 1940 before President Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiated a belated military buildup that still left the country woefully unprepared for the war to come.<sup>9</sup>

The 2012 version of the President’s National Security Strategy has abandoned the Defense Department’s long standing requirement that the United States have the ability to fight and win two wars simultaneously. Instead, the Obama Doctrine calls for a military capable of fighting and winning one war while denying the “objective of—or imposing unacceptable costs on—an opportunistic aggressor in a second region.”<sup>10</sup> “We are entering an era where American dominance on the seas, the skies, and in space can no longer be taken for granted,” Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel acknowledged.<sup>11</sup> The Obama Administration has chosen therefore to gamble on accepting a higher level of risk even though the United States can afford to spend substantially more on defense, based on the President’s dubious optimism about the ebbing of great power rivalry and his unwarranted confidence in the efficacy of soft power to vindicate the national interests in most places most of the time.

Yet the history of American diplomacy and the Obama Administration’s ineffective responses to the mounting dangers abroad attest that the greatest dangers lie in diminishing the United States’ strategic profile, making withdrawal rather than victory the priority in places such as Iraq, and allowing American hard power to wane. As Samuel Huntington observes, a significant correlation exists between the “the rise and fall of American power in the world and the rise of liberty and democracy in the world.”<sup>12</sup> The cascading chaos that Chollet notes on a global scale suggests the same grim outcome: the Obama Administration’s zeal to narrow American interests and shrink American military power has compounded the very costs and risks the Obama

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Moyer, “How Obama Shrank the U.S. Military,” *Wall Street Journal*, 2 August 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/how-obama-shrank-the-military-1438551147>.

<sup>9</sup> Moyer, *Strategic Failure: How President Obama’s Drone Warfare, Defense Cuts, and Military Amateurism Have Imperiled America* (New York: Threshold Editors, 2015), 48-59.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense,” January 2012, [www.defense.gov/news/defense\\_strategic\\_guidance.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/news/defense_strategic_guidance.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Remarks by Hagel and Dempsey on Fiscal Year 2015 Budget Preview.”

<sup>12</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 246-250; Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

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Doctrine strives to minimize. As Hoover Fellow and international relations scholar Josef Joffe trenchantly put it, the Obama Doctrine is universalism, “the politics of reticence abroad coupled with the expansion of the ‘social state’.”<sup>13</sup>

I offer in my book an account of how Obama’s ill-fated reset emboldened Putin in Ukraine and Syria, raised apprehensions among America’s Eastern European allies, and facilitated virulently an anti-American Russia and Iran filling the vacuum which Obama’s erosion of American capability and resolve created.<sup>14</sup> The book also contains a detailed account of how Obama snatched defeat from the jaws of a provisional but significant victory by failing to negotiate a status-of-forces agreement leaving a significant American military presence in Iraq. Writing in the *New Yorker*, Dexter Filkins—a liberal long affiliated with the *New York Times*, a newspaper that has typically been Obama’s defender—blames the President torpedoing such an agreement because he wanted the U.S. out heedless of the consequences.<sup>15</sup> Obama’s former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, in *Worthy Fight*, corroborates Filkins’s account.<sup>16</sup> The President squandered the best opportunity to consolidate a successful outcome in Iraq, to preclude the rise of ISIS in the first place, and to prevent Iran from using Iraq as an autobahn for fanning the flames of the raging sectarian war metastasizing beyond Syria where it began.

In contrast to what Chollet claims, the Iran deal is a looming disaster. The agreement puts Iran on the cusp of a nuclear breakout even in the unlikely event that the regime abides by the deal’s unverifiable and unenforceable provisions. By lifting sanctions, the agreement simultaneously and perversely subsidizes the Iranian regime which constitutes the greatest danger to U.S. interest in the Middle East while tranquilizing American public opinion and likely triggering a nuclear arms race in the most unstable, volatile region of the world teeming with rogue regimes. Nor does Chollet’s defense of the Administration’s mishandling of Syria withstand scrutiny. In contrast to what Chollet claims, the United States did not succeed in divesting Syria of its chemical weapons capability. Moreover, he underestimates the cost of inviting Russia to fill the power vacuum, which Obama’s capitulation on the red line created.<sup>17</sup> The Administration’s retreat also resonated negatively beyond the Middle East, undermining the credibility of Obama’s pivot to Asia, his serial hollow warnings to Putin, and his countless assurances he would not tolerate a nuclear Iran. As Harry Kazianis, the Executive Editor of the *National Interest*, observes:

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<sup>13</sup> Josef Joffe, *The Myth of American Decline: Politics, Economy, and a Half Century of False Prophecies* (New York: Liveright, 2014), 264-267.

<sup>14</sup> Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine*, 61-96; Ronald Tiersky, “Obama’s Bet on Putin Has Collapsed,” *Real Clear World*, 17 October 2016, [http://realclearworld.com/articles/2016/10/17/obamas\\_bet\\_on\\_putin\\_has\\_collapsed\\_112091.html](http://realclearworld.com/articles/2016/10/17/obamas_bet_on_putin_has_collapsed_112091.html).

<sup>15</sup> Dexter Filkins, “In Extremist Iraq Rise, American Legacy,” *New Yorker*, 11 June 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/in-extremists-iraq-rise-americas-legacy>.

<sup>16</sup> Leon Panetta and Jim Newton, *Worthy Fight: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 394-395.

<sup>17</sup> Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine*, 203-208.

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“the narrative that America cannot or will not come to Asia’s defense might have been unintentionally reinforced by Obama breaking of his ‘red line’ pledge in Syria, when he failed to intervene after Syrian President Bashar Assad used chemical weapons against Syrians.... The idea that Washington made—and broke—a commitment to act against a regime that slaughtered its own people with chemical weapons had a major impact on the thinking of Asian diplomats who count on American security guarantees or hope to see the United States remain as a counterbalancing force to China in the region. After events in Syria after 2013, any time I spoke to an Asian diplomat, the first question they would ask me would always sound like this: “How can you say you will honor your commitments to us when you won’t even punish a two-bit dictator like Assad who gasses his own people with weapons of mass destruction. How can we trust you when it comes to bigger crises, like something involving the Chinese?”<sup>18</sup>

The hollowness of the Obama Administration’s Asia Pivot may have the most negative consequences in the long run of all the Administration’s mistakes. The fatuous 2016 Presidential campaign has distracted attention from the defection of the Philippines from the American alliance system amid mounting apprehensions among the United States’ traditional Asian allies and a potentially new one (democratic India which the Obama Administration has largely neglected until recently) that the United States lacks the will, wisdom, and capability to deter an increasingly powerful, ambitious, arrogant, repressive, and aggressive Chinese regime seeking hegemony over this dynamic and opulent region. The Obama Administration bears a large share of the responsibility for this perilous erosion of American hard power and prestige in the world’s paramount power center. As the Administration shrinks the American military, China’s military buildup rolls on. Over the past two decades, China’s defense spending has increased by double-digits annually. China has become the world’s second largest military power, wielding an increasingly sophisticated and growing array of capabilities that increasingly call into question American military preeminence in the Western Pacific.<sup>19</sup>

The bipartisan National Defense Panel Review of the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review warns that “the balance of power in Asia is changing in ways unfavorable to the United States “because of the scale and sophistication of China’s military buildup.”<sup>20</sup> The panel warns, too, that “China’s renewed Nationalism and increasingly assertive unilateral actions, especially in the cyber and maritime domains, constitute a growing threat to international order... China’s assertive behavior presents the most serious long-term threat to the stability and security of U.S. allies in the region.”<sup>21</sup> According to Department of Defense consultant Michael Pillsbury, China is pursuing “a marathon strategy,” derived from the lessons of the Warring States period of Chinese History, seeking to supplant the United States as the world’s dominant power.<sup>22</sup> Andrew Krepinevich, president of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, compares what China calls a

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<sup>18</sup> Harry Kaziansis, “Rodrigo Duterte, Ultimate Realist?,” *Real Clear World*, 26 October 2016, [http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2016/10/26/rodrigo\\_duterte\\_ultimate\\_realist\\_112103.html](http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2016/10/26/rodrigo_duterte_ultimate_realist_112103.html).

<sup>19</sup> Kaufman, “Dangerous Doctrine,” 152-54.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as a Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015), 35-36.

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‘peaceful-rise’ strategy to the Soviet Union’s attempt to ‘Findlandize’ Europe: “If the (military) balance shifted in Moscow’s favor, America’s European allies might conclude that Moscow could not be resisted and would fall under Soviet sway. All of Europe would then share the fate of Finland, which has remained nominally independent after World War II, but abided by foreign policy rules dictated by Moscow.”<sup>23</sup> Krepinevich warns that, should the U.S. military advantage continue to erode, American allies and friends in Asia may have no choice but to follow Finland’s example.

Nor has the Obama Administration’s vaunted Asian Pivot—relying mainly on soft power, envisaging China more as a collaborator rather than competitor, defining climate change as a greater threat than China’s geopolitical ambitions, allocating a larger share to the Pacific of Obama’s willful smaller and still shrinking military—tamed an increasing authoritarian China’s swelling arrogance, ambitions, and hostility to freedom.

According to Robert Haddick, a contractor with the U.S. Special Operations Command, China is aggressively employing a salami-slicing strategy in pursuit of hegemony in the Western Pacific, involving the “slow accumulation of small changes, none of which in isolation amounts to a *casus belli* but which add up over time to a substantial change in the strategic picture.”<sup>24</sup> America’s Asian allies have a grimmer perception of the Chinese ambitions and current negative trends in the region than either Chollet or President Obama, who continues to “welcome” China’s peaceful rise. “We have a constructive relationship with China,” the President has often repeated. “So our goal is not to counter China. Our goal is not to contain China.”<sup>25</sup> According to a Pew Foundation survey conducted in 2014, however, “large majorities in many Asian countries fear that China’s territorial ambitions could lead to war.”<sup>26</sup>

Rising fear of China and corresponding doubts about American credibility underscore the main flaw of the Obama Administration’s Asian Pivot -- the growing deficiency of American hard power and resolve to underwrite it. Neither Obama’s soaring rhetoric nor his mantra of American smart power can substitute for that. The Administration’s current and long-term defense plans continue to broaden the gap between what the United States will have in air, sea, and space capabilities and what the military needs to maintain American military dominance in the Pacific on which the United States’ effective collaboration with

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew P. Krepinevich, “China’s “Findlandization Strategy in the Pacific,” *Wall Street Journal*, 11 September 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704164902575421753851494976>.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Haddick, “America Has No Answer to China’s Salami-Slicing,” *War on the Rocks*, 6 February 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/02/america-has-no-answer-to-chinas-salami-slicing/#>.

<sup>25</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama and Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines in a Joint Press Conference, Manila, Philippines, 28 April 2014, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/28//remarks-president-obama-and-president-benigno-aquino-iii-philippines-joi](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/28//remarks-president-obama-and-president-benigno-aquino-iii-philippines-joi).

<sup>26</sup> “How Asians View Each Other,” *Pew Research Global Attitudes Project*, July 2014, [www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/chapter-4-how-asians-view-each-other/](http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/chapter-4-how-asians-view-each-other/).

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democratic Japan, South Korea, and India depend.<sup>27</sup> Even Chuck Hagel concurs that “we are entering into an era where American dominance on the seas, in the skies, and in space can no longer be taken for granted.”<sup>28</sup>

The deteriorating military balance in East Asia will increase the probability and risk of states balancing with China. Nor can India, Japan, and South Korea—the lynchpins of a U.S.-led alliance system in the Pacific—collectively thwart China’s bid for hegemony minus a muscular American commitment to their security. As the author Robert Kaplan warns, even a multipolar Asia without the United States acting as the default power in the region would be a Chinese dominated Asia.<sup>29</sup> President Obama’s Dangerous Doctrine has enabled this gathering danger.

Chollet’s book over-rates Obama’s virtues and also mischaracterizes where the Obama Doctrine stands among rival traditions of American diplomacy and international relations theory. In contrast to what Chollet argues, Obama is not merely a retrencher in the post-World-War-Two tradition of American presidents. For instance, the Obama Doctrine falls well outside Stephen Stestanovich’s illuminating though oversimplified cycle of overcommitment and underperformance, which he argues has characterized American foreign policy for several decades.<sup>30</sup> Obama’s inclination to downplay the salience of ideology, democracy promotion, and regime type shares some affinities with the realism of President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The widely published foreign policy expert Colin Dueck rightly classifies Obama as more of an “accommodationist” than any Presidential realist or retrencher.<sup>31</sup> Obama strives for a more permanent reconciliation with America’s illiberal adversaries than a mere respite from the global responsibilities that impelled Nixon’s and Kissinger’s version of détente. The latter was far more robust at its softest than Obama’s ‘Dangerous Doctrine’ at its most vigilant.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast Chollet’s argument, Obama’s foreign policy bears little resemblance to that of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Instead, Eisenhower qualifies more as a consolidator of President Harry S. Truman’s policy of vigilant containment rather than as a retrencher—much less a conciliator of Obama’s variety. Fighting off the Isolationist Old Guard in the Republican Party, Eisenhower largely followed Truman’s policy of vigilant

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<sup>27</sup> Pillsbury, *Hundred Year Marathon*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> Chuck Hagel, quoted in Christopher J. Griffin and Robert Zarate, “FPI Bulletin: Risks and Reality in the Defense Budget,” *Foreign Policy Institute*, 26 February 2014, [www.foreignpolicy.org/content/fpi-bulletin-risks-and-reality-of-the-defense-budget](http://www.foreignpolicy.org/content/fpi-bulletin-risks-and-reality-of-the-defense-budget).

<sup>29</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (New York: Random House, 2014), 30.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Stestanovich, *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 3-13.

<sup>31</sup> Colin Deuck, *Hard Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 303.

<sup>32</sup> Robert G. Kaufman, “The Unrealistic Realism of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger,” in *War, Justice and Peace in American Grand Strategy: From the Founding Era to the Twenty-First Century*, ed., Bryan Paul Frost, Paul O. Carrese, and Stephen F. Knott (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming).

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containment, which committed the United States to muscular internationalism, especially in the world's major geopolitical power centers of Western Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. Ultimately, Eisenhower ended the war in Korea, but he did not leave America's South Korean ally on its own. In contrast to Obama's withdrawal from Iraq, Eisenhower kept thousands of American troops in South Korea. American military forces remain there to this day. Furthermore, Eisenhower significantly extended American security commitments and political engagement in the Middle East. Despite Eisenhower's warning about the military-industrial complex and the deleterious effects of defense spending on the domestic economy, his administration spent significantly more on defense as a percentage of GDP than Obama's. Eisenhower also increased spending on nuclear weapons substantially.<sup>33</sup>

Contrast that with Obama's steep reductions in defense spending. Eisenhower also increased American reliance on nuclear weapons, the very weapons President Obama has determined to eliminate. Finally, Eisenhower escalated the scope, intensity, and ambitions of covert operations as a centerpiece of national security policy. After leaving office, Eisenhower became even more hawkish. He advised incoming President John F. Kennedy that Laos was the key to Southeast Asia, possibly requiring direct intervention of American combat troops. He also criticized as too passive President Kennedy's acquiescence toward the Soviet Union's building the Berlin Wall in August 1961.<sup>34</sup>

Among post-war presidents, Obama's foreign policy doctrine most resembles the outlook predominating in the first three years of the Carter Administration, when Carter banked his not-so-grand-strategy on the assumption that the Soviet Union would emulate American restraint and concessions so long as the United States shed its inordinate fear of Communism.<sup>35</sup> *Res ipsa loquitur* that President Obama admires Jimmy Carter's foreign policy more than Ronald Reagan's.<sup>36</sup>

The Obama Doctrine also ill-accords with the sensibilities of the preeminent twentieth-century Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr, and the trajectory of his thought, notwithstanding Chollet's claims to the contrary (202-3). Contrast, to begin with, President Obama's inordinate faith in the notion and effectiveness of the "international community" with Niebuhr's profound skepticism, which he expressed emblematically in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.<sup>37</sup> By his reckoning the international community organically lacked the power and the prestige to enforce any semblance of a provisionally just peace. Niebuhr's unbridled support for Israel stands closer to the mainstream (until President-elect Donald Trump) of the post-1980 Republican Party

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<sup>33</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 125-196.

<sup>34</sup> Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine*, 42-44; Chollet, *The Long Game*, 210-211.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> David Skidmore, "Just Like Jimmy: Obama's foreign policy has been most successful when he emulated the much maligned Jimmy Carter," *US News and World Report*, October 5, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/opinions/blog/world-report/2015/10/15/obamas-jimmy-carter-like-foreign-policies-are-his-most-successful>.

<sup>37</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 110.

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than Obama's more mixed (at best) views about where the equities of the Arab-Israeli conflict lie or the best practicable remedies for this. Whereas the Obama Doctrine calls for strategic devolution, Niebuhr spent the most influential phase of his career worried primarily about the United States doing too little internationally than too much.

Niebuhr considered British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to be a political hero, a reverence President Obama does not share. Niebuhr's moral dichotomy between democracy and totalitarianism, his anti-perfectionist ethic, and his conviction about the inseparability of power and politics impelled him to advocated policies towards Nazi Germany similar to those of Churchill—the champion of fighting Adolf Hitler sooner rather than later and the defender of preemption against certain gathering dangers rather than Obama's almost categorical resumption of making force a last resort. Niebuhr's position on the Soviet Union evolved likewise from a fleeting hope in the possibility of collaboration with the USSR (in the spirit of Obama's reset with Putin) to a general satisfaction with the Truman Administration's policy and rational for dealing with what Niebuhr also considered the unappeasable threat emanating from the 'evil empire' of the Soviet Union<sup>38</sup>

In contrast to the ideas of the Obama Doctrine, Niebuhr emphasizes the importance of regime type and ideology in assessing friends, foes, threats, and opportunities. For all his warnings about the perils of hubris, Niebuhr drew critical moral and practical distinctions between stable liberal democracies and their illiberal enemies. He thus defended democracy as the best practicable form of government—if not with the exuberance of Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush, then certainly with far more import than the main thrust of the Obama Doctrine: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible but man's capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary."<sup>39</sup> Essentially, the Obama Doctrine accords less with Niebuhr's Christian realism rather than with an unsavory alloy of neorealism, liberal multilateralism shorn of its ideological dimensions, and anti-moralistic variants of classical realism in the vein of George F. Kennan, diplomat, historian, and perhaps the preeminent American classical realist of the twentieth century, with Henry Kissinger his only rival.

Alas, 2016 offered an abysmal choice for Neo-Reaganites such as this author who consider muscular internationalism grounded in American ideals the best practicable grand strategy.<sup>40</sup> A Hillary Clinton Presidency would have constituted a veritable Obama Third Term, while Trump has dangerously flirted with the name and substances of flying hero turned anti-Semite and Nazi apologist Charles Lindbergh's execrable 'America' First Isolationism' that is morally bankrupt and strategically unwise. Let us hope that during the American vacation from political sanity Churchill's adage proves right: The United States always does the right thing after trying everything else.

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<sup>38</sup> Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine*, 34-28.

<sup>39</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), xi.

<sup>40</sup> Robert G. Kaufman, "What's a Reagan Internationalist to Do?" *Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 2016, A15.

### Review by Ronald R. Krebs, University of Minnesota

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Sometime around 2050 or perhaps a bit later—if scholars can ever dig their way out of the overwhelming mounds of electronic communications—we will read the first histories, based on declassified documents, of President Barack Obama’s foreign policy. They will have the advantage not only of a relatively full documentary record, but of historical perspective—knowing how things turned out, that some missteps were less disastrous than they seemed at the time and that some apparent successes had unexpected terrible consequences. Until then, though, we have Derek Chollet’s *The Long Game*, which is as good a contemporary history of Obama’s foreign policy as we are likely to get.<sup>1</sup> This smart and thorough book is part memoir, part history, part policy analysis. It is hardly ‘objective,’ if such a thing were possible: Chollet served in the administration in various capacities, and he bears more than a little responsibility for U.S. foreign policy in these years. But you will not find here the self-serving history that is so common in policymaker memoirs. Certainly, Chollet mounts a vigorous defense of the administration’s record, but he is also reflective and sometimes self-critical, and he even at times gently points to where he differed from the boss he so clearly admires.

Chollet covers a lot of ground in *The Long Game*—the Syria red line, the Russia reset, the Arab Spring, the Libya intervention, the Iran nuclear deal. He takes the reader through the administration’s logic, presents the broad outlines of its approach to each challenge, forcefully rebuts critics, and more occasionally acknowledges that sometimes they have a point. Chollet’s analyses of alternative courses of action, while brief, are especially rewarding—both when they are persuasive and when they are not. Focusing only on hard security questions, the book does not address *all* aspects of Obama’s foreign policy. There is nothing wrong with that: the book plays to Chollet’s strengths, and it covers many of the most controversial decisions of Obama’s tenure. But there is no real discussion here of, among others, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, global financial coordination, the promotion of human rights, or climate change. Less-sexy security issues—such as efforts to limit terrorists’ access to financing—also get short shrift, as more surprisingly do some sexy ones—notably, counterterrorism by drone strike.

Chollet’s big argument is that Obama’s foreign policy has been guided, in the President’s penchant for sports metaphors, by “the long game.” Time and again, he contends, Obama has resisted the Washington ‘blob,’ whose representatives are located both inside and outside the administration. He has rebelled against national security experts’ conventional wisdom: to respond to every provocation, to throw around America’s military muscle, to pursue countless initiatives advancing America’s myriad interests around the globe. Instead, Chollet says, Obama has tried—albeit necessarily imperfectly, as his favorite theologian Reinhold Niebuhr might say—to balance America’s many interests, exhibit patience, and act with restraint and precision. All this amounts, he believes, to an Obama grand strategy (xi), even a revolutionary one. “Obama defied Washington,” according to the book’s subtitle, and he “has redefined the purpose and exercise of American power for a new era” (xiii).

Chollet contends that the Obama administration has not received the credit it deserves for its foreign policy accomplishments. I agree. Charged by the American people with getting U.S. forces out of Iraq, Obama did so: critics who allege that Obama squandered the gains of the surge and ‘lost’ Iraq overlook that the surge, for all its tactical successes, was a strategic failure, that its political impact was minimal, and that the United

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<sup>1</sup> Full disclosure: I went to graduate school with Chollet, but we are not close friends.

States had made little headway in forging a more inclusive politics in post-Saddam Iraq even when it had over 160,000 troops stationed there. Obama's aggressive drone-strike campaign has probably advanced U.S. security while minimizing U.S. exposure, and, while critics have rightly pointed to its excesses and errors, they have not persuasively argued that the United States would be better off leaving irreconcilable, committed adversaries alone in their foreign sanctuaries and relying on standard law-enforcement measures. The Iran nuclear deal held out the possibility of political change, but, at the very least, bought time and access; it looks poor only alongside some imaginary world in which sanctions were maintained permanently and Iran disarmed, or the regime was overthrown and replaced with Western, secular elites. These accomplishments are even more striking when one considers what a terrible hand Obama was dealt—with two festering wars and an economic crisis that seemed, as he took office, to be mounting toward another Great Depression. Obama's foreign policy has been most successful when he has been most true to his pragmatic and realist inclinations.

But Obama's foreign policy has not been revolutionary, and it has not redefined America's role in the world. Obama has been circumspect about the use of military force—but, in the end, the United States still took a leading role in Libya and Syria and even Iraq. He has repeatedly ridiculed Washington's obsession with 'credibility'—but he fell prey to this same line of thinking in Syria in 2013, defending the 'red line' and nearly launching air strikes, until Congress got cold feet and then the Russians threw him a life line. The driving logic behind the Libya intervention two years before was similar, in Chollet's telling: Obama believed that failing to act to prevent humanitarian catastrophe in Benghazi would do inestimable damage to America's credibility as a global leader (98), especially if the European allies intervened on their own, as seemed likely (103). Intervention in Libya was thus premised less on America's indispensability—that is, that the world would not act in the absence of U.S. leadership—than on America's alleged interest in being seen as indispensable. In these cases, Obama has not challenged the blob: he has gone along, albeit perhaps half-heartedly, with the blob, has reinforced the blob, and arguably has become part of the blob.

The Obama administration's foreign policy has not systematically or fundamentally challenged the core ideas and narratives of the bipartisan foreign policy elite. The pivot to Asia was a signature initiative, but, as Chollet admits, "the idea that the dynamics in Asia will matter most to the United States in the long run is the closest there is to a consensus among foreign policy experts" (54) of both parties. Nor would any disagree with Obama's goals in Asia, as Chollet summarizes them: "to sustain a stable security environment and a regional order rooted in economic openness, peaceful resolution of disputes, and respect for universal rights and freedoms" (54). Some worried that, if anything, the pivot was too much the conventional wisdom: they feared that shifting U.S. military assets to Asia would touch off a security dilemma with China.<sup>2</sup> The Russia reset was not new either, as Chollet acknowledges: many a president (though perhaps none with quite the enthusiasm and warmth of Donald Trump) has come into office promising that he will establish a better working relationship with Russia, only eventually to find those hopes disappointed. Apparently Chollet agrees that Obama really did not defy Washington and usher in a revolution in U.S. foreign policy: "in fundamental ways, [Obama] embraced the consensus that mainstream Democrats had rallied around after [Bill Clinton] left office" (41).

Liberal and conservative foreign policy experts differ in important ways, as Chollet elucidates (41-42), but the recent presidential race has reminded us how much they share: the international as a locus of opportunity as

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Robert S. Ross, "The Problem with the Pivot: Obama's New Asia Policy is Unnecessary and Counterproductive," *Foreign Affairs* 91:6 (November/December 2012), 70-82.

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well as threat, U.S. leadership as serving the interests of both America and the world (i.e. the United States does well by doing good), a foreign policy informed by both power and principle. Barack Obama does not take issue with these tenets. His foreign policy has been in keeping with these deeper underpinnings and thus is situated well within the bounds of legitimacy. In fact, his foreign policy has been rather moderate—in its pragmatism (for instance, with respect to advancing human rights and democracy), in its openness to and even embrace of military instruments, in the selectiveness of its international collaborations. It has been revolutionary only if one treats the neoconservative-inspired interventionism of the first George W. Bush administration as the baseline. The limits of Obama's challenge to the bipartisan foreign policy establishment are clear when set alongside the pronouncements of candidate and (at the time of writing) president-elect Donald Trump. Though Trump's statements on foreign policy were sometimes rooted in ignorance and often contradictory, one can glimpse a worldview at odds with almost every one of those principles.

A key article of faith in Washington, which Trump has questioned, is that it is America's right and responsibility to design and sustain international order. This mindset gives rise to accusations of the "loss" of X (China in 1949, Iraq today)—as if X were America's to lose—and to anger when the benighted resist U.S. efforts to teach them their wise ways—as if the United States alone defined what was desirable and held the consensus keys to the kingdom—and to breast-beating and soul-searching when things go awry—as if local leaders had the freedom to chart their own course only when the U.S. government erred. It leads to U.S. policymakers' insistence that they might have succeeded if only they had had more Y (e.g. more money, more public support, more military autonomy). Such persistence is admirable unless it produces yet another costly failure, especially when non-Americans are the ones who disproportionately bear those costs.

Obama does not question this article of faith. Thus Chollet writes that "Obama is a champion of American *exceptionalism*" who believes deeply that "America is best positioned to lead" (xvi-xvii, italics in original). However, this order-setting and order-sustaining tenet of U.S. foreign policy is in deep tension with Obama's seemingly sincere desire to keep the United States out of the intervention game and with 'the long-game' emphasis on restraint. When challenges to the U.S.-led order arise—as they inevitably do—it prescribes that the United States lead the charge. It is the reason that, despite Obama's proclivities and better judgment, the U.S. military has been nearly as busy beating back challenges to liberal world order under Obama as under Bush. It is the reason that Chollet is so blistering, time and again, toward critics who wonder whether a given intervention should have been undertaken in the first place. When it comes to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Chollet sees the United States as "a doctor dealing with a particularly advanced cancer" who is "seeking to ease the side effects and prevent the disease from metastasizing while searching for a lasting answer" (138). Who appointed the United States as doctor to minister to the divided Syrian body politic, and who empowered it to decide which body tissue was healthy and which tumor-ridden? It was of course largely self-appointed, as the defender of global order.

These assumptions drive Chollet's discussion of Libya as well. That intervention, he declares, was "designed straight out of the Long Game playbook" (101), structured to keep the United States from "owning" it. In the end, of course, the United States "owned" Libya anyway, the limited intervention's long-term consequences proved disastrous (especially for Libyans), and it is not at all clear that a large-scale intervention, which was politically untenable besides, would have produced better results. Yet Chollet insists that "looking back, the tougher question is not whether the U.S. should have intervened, but if it could have done so more effectively" (104). After a lengthy analysis (104-113), Chollet's answer seems to be not really: "Libya illustrates the limits of what outsiders can accomplish without a significant military presence to provide security, logistics, and organizational support" (110). This ignores a chief lesson of the Iraq adventure: that

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there are profound limits to what outsiders can accomplish even *with* a significant military presence to provide security, logistics, and organizational support. Leaving that aside, does it not then follow that the United States should not have intervened in Libya in the first place? Chollet shies away from this conclusion. Sometimes “the best one can hope for is incremental progress” (113), he says, but Libya has not enjoyed even that. Standing aside might have led to “the massacre of thousands and a civil war boiling over” (113), he conjectures, but that happened anyway, and Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi might have crushed the rebellion and reinstalled his repressive but semi-stable political order. Chollet’s default stance seems to be that the United States must at least try to bring about progressive political change, even if the likelihood of success is low. This is not the restraint of “the long game.” The blob strikes back.

Rarely does Chollet—who presumably would have received a top post had Hilary Clinton become president—think the United States should stand aside. He was in favor early on of arming “the opposition” in Syria—the term is ill-fitting, if not misleading, since there never was a unified opposition—even though that would not be “decisive” and had merely a “modest upside:” giving a psychological boost to regime opponents, planting some doubt in Assad’s mind as to his regime’s survival, gaining some influence over regime opponents (141). In retrospect, Chollet admits, there was no missed opportunity: arming Syrian rebel groups earlier would likely have achieved little (146-147). Yet he seems offended by the suggestion that the United States should not even try: “This does not mean that we should throw up our hands and quit” (147).

Chollet observes, at the start of *The Long Game*, that America’s “most costly mistakes in the past have come when we were seduced by the idea of our omnipotence” (xix). I would amend that insight: America’s most costly mistakes in the past have come when it was seduced by the idea that it could always get the job done, that it could overcome whatever challenges lay in the way. Stanley Hoffmann long ago noted that Americans tend to look upon global politics with an admirable can-do spirit that reduces everything to an engineering problem.<sup>3</sup> That optimistic, problem-solving attitude is the secret to America’s success, but it has also been at the root of America’s greatest errors abroad. It sustains the imperial impulse, and it is at odds with a default stance of restraint. There is no reason to refrain from trying to build a better mousetrap if you believe that you know why you have not built a better mousetrap in the past and if you think you can build a better one in the future. There is no reason to stand aside if you are aiming merely for ‘incremental progress’—for a slightly better mousetrap—since that always seems potentially achievable. It is revealing that a book touting “the long game” has such difficulty adhering to it, and that is not surprising: order-making is in the DNA of postwar U.S. foreign policy. Sometimes though, you cannot build a better mousetrap, and you would have been better off not trying: perhaps the mousetrap misfires and shuts on your fingers, or perhaps it works too well, and dangerous, aggressive rats take the place of the timid, if irritating, mice.

One of the book’s central themes is that Obama and his team have unfairly acquired a reputation for weakness and even incompetence. Part of the problem lies with the President himself. Though a masterful orator, Obama has been reluctant to employ those talents in governing, as if that were somehow at odds with the ethics of the office: “I’m less concerned about style points. I’m much more concerned about getting the policy right” (24). However, the modern presidency is rhetorical in nature, as Jeffrey Tulis has argued.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver’s Troubles, or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

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Obama noted at the end of his first term, in a reflective moment, that the presidency is equally about “tell[ing] a story to the American people that gives them a sense of unity and purpose and optimism, especially during tough times.”<sup>5</sup> Yet he continued in his second term to struggle to offer that reassuring narrative. On the campaign trail, Obama spun a beautiful and inspiring tale that resonated with millions. But, as the nation’s governor, he preferred to lead a rational discussion of the costs and benefits of policy. Hillary Clinton, who cannot hold a candle to Obama as a rhetorician, was on point in charging that “we don’t even tell our own story very well these days” (87).

However, it wasn’t just the President, Chollet astutely observes: Obama confronted a wicked rhetorical problem. “It is very hard to articulate a future of optimism while explaining a foreign policy of limits,” Chollet writes, “... without being criticized as defeatist or as denying America’s inherent greatness” (85). As resources, even for a superpower, are always scarce, all presidents have run up against constraints, but few have publicly acknowledged it for this very reason. Obama thought a more honest conversation could help “sustain America’s power and leadership for the long-term” (86). Put differently, Obama received little acclaim for his foreign policy because it was hard to legitimate within the terms of the dominant exceptionalist, order-making narrative.

That narrative helps explain the outcome more directly as well. It imagined a world that the United States should be able to shape at will. If there were setbacks, it must be because the President and his advisers were inept or, as Trump insinuated during the campaign, because they did not really have America’s best interests at heart. Over the last eight years, global dynamics from the Middle East to East Asia to Europe have repeatedly resisted American desires, and the U.S.-built international order has come to seem shaky. For a narrative that insists on America’s unequalled capacity to dictate world order and that all but denies agency to others, these are “policy failures” to be laid at the feet of the Obama administration.

Was Obama doomed to rhetorical failure? Could he have sought to fashion a different narrative foundation for U.S. foreign policy debate? Perhaps, if even he fell short, no one could succeed. But, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> presidents can shape these narrative bases (1) when successes bolster their authority and permit them to advance alternative narratives and (2) when they embrace a rhetoric of storytelling. This suggests a double missed opportunity for Obama to have exercised greater rhetorical leadership. I have not conducted a systematic analysis of Obama’s speeches on foreign affairs, but he is certainly reputed to have engaged in a rhetoric marked much more by instrumental argument than by storytelling. Moreover, Obama enjoyed one marked triumph—the killing of the al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden—but the administration seemed, in its wake, to make a concerted effort to maintain narrative continuity. White House officials were seemingly more concerned afterwards that Americans would think the war against ‘violent extremism’ won than they were eager to reshape the bases of U.S. national security debate.

Chollet contends that “on the issues that matter most for the Long Game—how and where America uses military force, how the U.S. approaches its enemies and works with its partners, and how America should

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<sup>5</sup> Lindsey Boerma, “Obama Reflects on His Biggest Mistake as President,” CBS News, 12 July 2012, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-reflects-on-his-biggest-mistake-as-president/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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conceive of its power and exert its leadership—Obama’s mark will be enduring and largely positive” (xiii). But that mark seems likely to be fleeting. Mostly Obama has avoided leaving behind messes for his successor to clean up, and, given the track record of postwar U.S. presidents, that is no mean accomplishment. But if he had been inclined to exercise greater rhetorical leadership, Obama might have succeeded in hewing more closely to “the long game,” to a foreign policy that took restraint as the default, and in constraining his successors.

Historians are often kind to presidents. I suspect they will be especially kind to Barack Obama, if only because his two terms are sandwiched between the self-inflicted disasters of Bush and the (likely) self-inflicted disasters of Trump. In *The Long Game*, Derek Chollet has written the essential first draft of history of the Obama administration’s foreign policy. It should be required reading for all citizens, residents, and friends of the United States as the Tweeter-in-chief ascends to the presidency—so we can more fully appreciate the searching intelligence, personal and intellectual discipline, and fundamental decency that Obama brought to the Oval Office and U.S. foreign policy.

### Review by Patrick Porter, University of Exeter

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I am grateful to Hal Brands for inviting my comments on Derek Chollet's *The Long Game*. Unlike many works, Chollet's is a sympathetic and measured account of Barack Obama's statecraft as his presidency enters its twilight. His book is a valuable contribution not only to Obama-ology. It is also a notable intervention into recurrent debates about US foreign and defence policy, the restless issue of America's grand strategy, or how states orchestrate their power and their commitments over the long haul. He draws on direct experience of Obama's decision-making, having worked as senior director for strategic planning on the National Security Council Staff and as U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. And so we have a lucid account written by someone who has whispered in the ear of princes. The book's strength—and its weakness—is its closeness to the subject.

In brief, Chollet portrays a presidency that 'redefined America's role in the world.' Through a mix of eight positive practices (or 'tenets') identified by the author, Obama and his advisors picked their way carefully through international chaos and domestic upheaval. These were "balance, sustainability, restraint, precision, patience, fallibility, scepticism, and exceptionalism." (xv) As Chollet argues, not only were Obama's substantive decisions, on balance, wise, but for the most part, his presidency marked a circumspect and sober style of governance that future decision-makers should emulate.

Chollet's study of Obama is tinged with affection. A list of tenets comes close to a list of virtues, and the danger of such studies is that they degenerate into hagiography. Chollet, fortunately, avoids this temptation, studiously noting where Obama fell short. There are really two Obamas. The first is the one of soaring rhetoric and 'uplift,' whose messianic presence and promise excited unrealistic hopes that grand gestures in themselves could change the world. In Chollet's presentation, this version of the presidency fell short. Obama's Cairo speech of 2009, where he offered an historic olive branch to the Arab-Islamic world, did not transform America's relationship in ways that many hoped. Likewise, a glance at Russia's doctrines or North Korea's activities suggests that Obama's turn to nuclear abolitionism has not led to the transformation desired, as articulated in his pledge in Prague to make major strides towards ridding the world of the world's most destructive weapon. There was also more than a little wishful naivety in the early failure to take Russia seriously as a geopolitical actor, the cloying 'reset button,' and the unjustified shock at Moscow's opportunistic pushback in the Crime and the Ukraine. Libya has barely recovered from the West's gift of liberal intervention in 2011, an experiment in state-breaking that chastened the President and strengthened his scepticism about the idealistic hawks who have been his most persistent critics.

There is another Obama, however, as Chollet observes, and this is my main point of agreement. This is the cool-headed and deliberative decision-maker highly attuned to limits and what is possible, who is capable of seeing beyond the cacophony of media sound bites and sloganeering punditry. This President was dealt a weak hand. He inherited an economic crisis (a near-meltdown of the financial system in the Great Recession) and a costly and polarising war in Iraq. Working from this position, Obama and his administration deserve credit for some impressive achievements. When opponents and critics were forcefully asserting alternative courses of action, Obama made historical choices. He prevented a Depression, through consequential interventions in the economy. He rolled back the Iranian nuclear programme without a shooting war. He widened the focus of America's strategic attentions to the Asia-Pacific and Asia-Indian regions. He steadily strangled the zealous Islamic State through a patient and targeted containment strategy: in defending America's limited but real interests in this regard, Obama steered between the poles of overreaching commitment and defeatist passivity. He oversaw a rapprochement with Cuba. And he helped pull off the

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Paris climate accords. Readers will have their differences with, quibbles about, or even fundamental objections to some or all of these ventures. Chollet must be right, though, that Obama's disciplined 'long game' made each of them possible. The figurehead and leader of al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, no longer taunts and threatens the US, and there was a very Obama-esque mix of nerve, calculated risk and discretion in the manner of his killing. Obama's critics on Syria have not yet advanced a realistic, achievable, or plausible plan for intervening without courting irresponsible risks. Their catch-cry of 'red lines' and 'credibility' has been largely unaccompanied by serious analysis of the likely consequences. Better to make empty threats and back down, than to wage war for fear of embarrassment, thereby causing an escalating credibility crisis and call forth worse security threats.

I have one major disagreement with Chollet, not about a specific policy choice but about the balance between continuity and discontinuity. Putting it simply, Obama has *not* changed America's fundamental role. Chollet has observed that this President and his inner circle has gone differently about their decision-making, and that there are important differences in emphasis between parties and administrations. This has led him to overstate his case about Obama redefining America's global design. From a more distant vantage point, the foundations of America's grand strategy endured through the 44<sup>th</sup> presidency. The underlying logic that links together America's major commitments and choices since 1945 is a constant one, with its objective being the prevention of a world of competitive multipolarity, through the reinvention of the world in America's image and under America's superintendence. This strategy is made up of *preponderance* (the amassing of overwhelming strength well beyond what America needs for self-defence, to the point where other rivals cannot compete); *reassurance*, with the U.S. as guarantor and security provider, with garrisoned protectorates in Western Europe, South Korea and Japan, securing the 'commons' and access to resources, underwriting the security of allies and partners to dampen their security ambitions and persuade them not to pursue self-reliance that could create rival power centres; *integration* and the 'Open Door,' whereby America gives potential competitors an equity stake in its brand of market capitalism through the integration of countries into friendly institutions and markets, as anticipated in the three 'Notes' of Secretary of State John Hay between 1899-1902; and what Francis Gavin calls America's *inhibition mission*<sup>1</sup>, it's effort to prevent nuclear proliferation in order to retain freedom of action. Presidents who have flirted with departing from these doctrines have paid a price. Obama did not begin his presidency from zero, or just from his own attitudes. Accumulated power and habit set down an outer boundary to policy debate from which it was difficult to stray.

Obama's regular invoking of 'leadership' was loaded with all four of these doctrines. He rededicated his administration to all of these traditional commitments. His slow build-up in Asia to counter a rising China, or at least to build 'containment capacity,' applied the traditional logic to an emerging regional centre of world power, just as his pursuit of a Trans-Pacific Partnership continues the logic of the Open Door. Chollet's closeness to the subject leads him to lose sight of these fundamentals. To be sure, details and choices *below* the grand strategic do matter, about how much to invest in international institutions, or how far to shift emphasis towards economics. Democrats may prefer multilateralism more often, Republicans may urge a quicker resort to the sword. But even these generalisations are countered by important exceptions. A longer view of the patterns of American behaviour suggests the inadequacy of classifying a 'liberal' or 'conservative' idea of US grand strategy, as Chollet seems to. This is not ultimately a book about the merits of specific

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<sup>1</sup> Francis J. Gavin, 'Strategies of Inhibition: US Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Non-proliferation' *International Security* 40:1 (2015): 9-46.

judgements, about an intervention here or applying sanctions there. It is about America's role in the world. Obama worked as a cautiously calculating actor but within the parameters of a multi-decade, ambitious grand strategy that is now becoming harder to sustain. Whether Obama should have accepted the fundamental principles of traditional US grand strategy is an important question, but not one for this exchange. Suffice to say that these ideas are powerfully constraining, setting limits to what a prudent president like Obama can achieve.

Where does this leave us? I am completing this review only days after the election of a reckless demagogue to the country's highest office, one who mixed together conspiratorial hysteria, violent Jacksonian nationalism, and the paranoid style. Donald Trump vowed on the campaign trail to dismantle Obama's legacy and repudiate his signature international achievements. He threatened to bring back torture and collective punishment, he was relaxed about both using nuclear weapons and their spread, and his inconsistent shifts from one position to another threaten an era of growing disorder. I think this is an unambiguously bad thing. In any event, I can only hope that readers will forgive this response if it sounds the note of a dying fall. What even an incisive book like *The Long Game* can achieve in the face of such a storm is doubtful. Chollet has at least crafted a study that will help to interpret 'where' we are departing from, and will mark a standard to which the Republic can return.

**Review by Mary E. Sarotte, University of Southern California**

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Readers looking for an accessible and engaging read on Obama's foreign policy will find it in Derek Chollet's *The Long Game*. Part memoir and part overview of the foreign policy record of the Obama administration, Chollet draws on his experience serving in the White House, State Department, and Pentagon to provide an overview of what he views as the central components of Obama's grand strategy (xi). That strategy is—as the book's title indicates—centered on the notion of playing the 'long game' in history. Obama is comfortable, Chollet argues, with incremental (or even unachieved) outcomes in the short term because of a sense that there will be a pay-off in the longer term.

In the execution of this strategy, Chollet sees Obama as guided by eight criteria. Chollet summarizes these criteria at the outset of the book, develops them in more detail in various places in the text, and then revisits them in a lengthy recap (215-228). Summarized briefly, the core eight criteria are “balance, sustainability, restraint, precision, patience, fallibility, skepticism, and exceptionalism” (xv).

The author situates Obama in the context of previous presidential administrations by arguing that the previous leaders most admired by the current president shared his attachment to these principles: Dwight Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush. For similar reasons, the author argues that Obama is also an admirer of German Chancellor Angela Merkel (204-211). The main chapters of the book recapitulate various foreign policy developments during the Obama presidency in light of these principles, examining how, in Chollet's opinion, Obama deployed them in decision-making on Syria, Libya, and elsewhere. Readers interested in the details of Obama-era foreign policy-making will find much of interest in these chapters.

To this reader, perhaps the most interesting account was Chapter 6, “The Bear Roars Back,” focusing on Russian President Vladimir Putin's actions in Crimea and Ukraine in 2014 and their legacy. Chollet talks about his personal experience in working on this issue, thereby providing readers with a front-row seat to the development of Obama's strategy and its implementation. For example, Chollet talks about unexpected complications that arose while implementing the decision to provide non-lethal military assistance to the Ukrainians in 2014. As he explains: “The quickest route would be via military aircraft, but senior White House officials were concerned that the image of US military cargo planes with their ‘grey tails’ could be provocative to Moscow.” The materiel was, as a result, trucked in. But when Chollet later visited Ukraine himself, he saw sitting on a runway in Kiev “two hulking US Air Force C-17s, with their grey tails in full glory for all to see,” thanks the visit by the advance team for Vice President Joe Biden. Fortunately, “[i]f the Russians notice, they didn't care” (176-177).

Throughout the book, Chollet's assessment of Obama's grand strategy is unfailingly positive. The author compares Obama to George Kennan (xi) and even argues that “he has done more to shape American foreign policy—and a new generation of foreign policy leaders—than any Democratic president since John F. Kennedy” (xiii). As more and more ‘alumni’ of the Obama administration begin to write their memoirs, it will be interesting to contrast their assessments with Chollet's, which for now stands as the most positive one in print.

Of course, as with any book, there are a few aspects to quibble about. The introduction seems to imply that the following chapters might focus on examples of each of the eight principles in action, but they do not in fact do so. The book also jumps around chronologically, which can be confusing at times. And there is a not entirely resolved tension between the memoir component of the book—which is engaging—and the analytical

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component. Chollet developed an enormous personal sense of admiration for Obama while serving under him, and the anecdotes where the author talks about his own experiences directly are some of the strongest aspects of the book. But the reader wishes that the author had dived more deeply into the complexities and failures of, say, the Russian ‘reset,’ to take just one example.

In summary: in clear and accessible writing, Chollet records for posterity the multiple factors that he feels were crucial in shaping Obama’s decision-making at crucial junctures. Historians owe Chollet a debt for committing his experiences and analysis to paper quickly after his departure from office, thereby providing details while still fresh in his memory. This is a useful first-cut at understanding the complicated issues that Obama faced and the strategy that he used to face them.

## Author's Response by Derek Chollet, The German Marshall Fund of the United States

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Barack Obama was a president of vaulting ambition, but also humbly understood how hard change can be. Perhaps because he has a historian's sense of time, or because he grew up looking at the continental United States from afar (in Hawaii and Indonesia), Obama was comfortable with the world's complexities, and acutely aware of both the potential and peril of America's use of power abroad. "We're on this planet a pretty short time, so that we cannot remake the world entirely during the little stretch we have," Obama told the *New Yorker's* David Remnick in 2013. Decisions matter, he said, but "at the end of the day we're part of a long-running story. We just try to get our paragraph right."<sup>1</sup>

After serving over six years in the Obama Administration, I wrote *The Long Game* as an early stab at placing the history of Obama's foreign policy within the long-running story of American diplomacy, showing how Obama tried to get his paragraph right, and when and why he came up short. Whatever one's perspective of the merits of specific decisions, my hope was to shed some light on how to think about Obama's foreign policy and America's role in the world—and importantly, the state of the political debate we have about both.

On balance, I believe Obama adeptly handled the tremendous challenges he inherited, forging a policy direction that did not remake the world, but enhanced America's ability to make it a better place. So the book's title has a double meaning: I argue that as a matter of grand strategy, Obama played a "long game"—like a foreign policy version of the value-investor Warren Buffett, he paid less attention to the day-to-day scorekeeping of Washington chatterers for an eventual payoff. And I contend that in history's "long game," Obama's foreign policy legacy will hold up quite well.

The book intended to spark a debate and answer critiques about Obama's record—many of which are valid, while others have struck me as facile or partisan. It also sought to explain many of the difficult choices the Obama Administration faced, walking readers through the logic of decisions and exploring deliberations that, with hindsight, could have been made differently. I distilled the core tenets of Obama's foreign policy approach into an eight-part "checklist," which helps interpret Obama's decisions and can serve as a guide to future policymakers. It was my hope that the book would be useful to those trying to make sense of the world during the Obama era, and to scholars who will study these events for years to come. That's why I am grateful to H-Diplo and ISSF for convening such a distinguished panel to comment on *The Long Game*, and pleased to offer a brief response.

Mary Sarotte observes that my take on Obama's grand strategy is "unfailingly positive," wondering how that assessment will hold up as other memoirs are written and the archives open. As the history of Obama's foreign policy unfolds, I am confident it will be rich and fascinating, in part because of the momentous and complex events involved, but also because of the record Obama has left behind to mine. Some may question Obama's judgment, but no one doubts that he was a rigorous and deep thinker who conducted a remarkably open and exhaustive—some would say *too* open and exhaustive—decision-making process, offering plenty of fodder for future scholars. So, more is to come. While I hope the fundamental assessments I offer in the book will endure, the record will soon be greatly enhanced by memoirs by many former colleagues (such as Susan Rice,

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<sup>1</sup> David Remnick, "Ten Days in June," *The New Yorker*, 26 June 2015.

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Ben Rhodes, and Samantha Power, among others) and, most importantly, by Obama himself, in a presidential memoir that will certainly be a blockbuster.

Patrick Porter and Ronald Krebs argue that Obama was less revolutionary than advertised, and really did not redefine America's global role. Instead, they observe, he pursued policies that fit comfortably within the internationalist tradition of American leadership that goes back six decades. To a certain extent, they are right. Obama believes that the U.S. is the 'indispensable nation' and therefore must be active and engaged in the world. He believes in asserting leadership to solve problems, address threats, bring countries together in common cause, and to uphold the liberal international order. He believes in strong institutions like NATO and the UN, a commitment to allies, and the central role of U.S. military power alongside reinvigorated diplomacy and development.

Yet when Obama took office in January 2009, this traditional leadership role was deeply imperiled and urgently needed fixing. Obama's critics (and Robert Kaufman's review provides a textbook example of their arguments) like to assert that he presided over America's decline. But I believe they have it exactly backwards: in 2008, America *was* in a precipitous decline—on the brink of economic collapse, in the midst of two wars that had drained resources and severely damaged its standing, with global challenges like climate change and the Iran nuclear threat mounting, and with domestic woes festering (such as health care). Moreover, geopolitics was changing fundamentally—especially with the rise of China and India—and for a variety of reasons the U.S. found itself out of position to deal with this emerging new reality.

So it was Obama's core task to arrest American decline and renew and revise U.S. leadership. This meant seizing new opportunities while not compounding the problems he already had. It did not mean the U.S. would solve everything instantly—because some problems are beyond its power, or require long-term efforts, or are insolvable—but would be in a better position to defend its interests help bring about positive change. Obama liked to compare the presidency to being a relay racer—inheriting a situation he could do nothing about, having a moment to do as much as possible, and then passing the baton to the next racer. Obama believed he inherited a pretty weak position, and was determined to hand-off something better to his successor.

In style and approach, I find Obama strikingly similar to Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush, a comparison I explore briefly in the book's last chapter. All three presidents believed in vigorous American leadership, but were focused on not overextending the U.S. and achieving balance in its efforts at home and abroad. Each operated within a policy ecosystem that had little patience for nuance and often pushed for 'more' of everything, without regard to trade-offs or strategic solvency. All struggled with handling allies and calibrating military interventions (Guatemala, Lebanon, and Laos for Eisenhower; Panama, Iraq, and Bosnia for Bush 41; and Libya, Syria, and Iraq for Obama). And all grappled with toxic domestic forces that roiled the political debate over foreign policy (Joseph McCarthy; Patrick Buchanan and Ross Perot; and Trump). The combined lessons of these three presidencies warrant far more attention than the few pages I could dedicate in *The Long Game*, which is why it is the topic of my next book (tentatively entitled, *A Middle Way*, which is how Bush described Eisenhower's approach in 1980).

Like Eisenhower and Bush 41, Obama was a pragmatic problem-solver, and Krebs is right to remind us of Stanley Hoffmann's observation that this represents a distinct style of American statecraft. Hoffmann draws the comparison to "skill thinking" like engineering, but I find medicine a more revealing analogy for Obama's

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problem-solving style.<sup>2</sup> Suspicious of quick fixes, Obama was careful to diagnose problems and focus on outcomes, often pushing his advisors to show that a suggested policy would have the intended effect while also accounting for unintended consequences.

For example, on crises like Syria, Obama would often say that he was not ideologically predisposed to inaction, but that he needed to be convinced that something had a chance of working, arguing that the U.S. should not overextend itself on projects it could not deliver on. This was the thought behind Obama's much maligned 'don't do stupid sh\*t' admonition, which is a saltier version of the Hippocratic Oath. I think Obama would agree with the observation made by the surgeon Atul Gawande—whose writings on medical decision-making greatly influenced my thinking about Obama and the inherent challenges of foreign policy decision-making generally, and from whom I borrowed the idea of a foreign policy checklist—that we do damage when “we fail to acknowledge that [our] power is finite and always will be.”<sup>3</sup>

This point—on limits—is worth dwelling on, because it is central to the story of Obama's foreign policy. The U.S. has fewer limits or constraints than any other power, but still it cannot do everything everywhere. Choosing when, where, and how to deploy America's resources is a president's essential task. And making these choices requires grappling with risks, trade-offs, and competing priorities, either at home or abroad. One cannot consider challenges and goals in isolation, pretending that more of everything is always the best answer. That, of course, is not a strategy. Or at least it is not a sustainable one.

But as the history of Obama's foreign policy shows, it is very difficult for an American president to stand-up and plainly acknowledge limits. This trait is both something that makes America unique (I think of it as the 'Great Gatsby syndrome,' or the very American idea that the U.S. can make its own reality and do anything) and, I believe, is a problem of the foreign policy establishment of which I am part. Too often we have debates as though there are no trade-offs, as if America's power and resources are limitless, as if costs are easily known and always manageable, and as if all problems can be solved instantaneously with absolute answers. Again, medical doctors grapple with this too, commonly dealing with chronic ailments they cannot cure. So the best they can do is buy time, mitigate the worst side effects, or contain the problem. It seems odd that in our everyday lives we accept this as part of medical practice, but not in foreign policy.

Obama struggled to articulate a foreign policy vision of ambition within limits, and some of his most controversial decisions—such as the limited interventions in Libya and Syria, the willingness to pull U.S. troops out of Iraq as scheduled, or imposing a withdrawal deadline on the surge of forces in Afghanistan—were rooted in the desire to strike such a balance. His failure to inspire strong support for his foreign policy was not for lack of trying, and here I disagree with the observation by Krebs that Obama missed an opportunity to exercise greater rhetorical leadership.

Obama was never short on rhetoric—this is a contrast to Eisenhower and Bush 41, who often wrestled to find the right words—and he relished using the bully pulpit. He gave a number of important statements on

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<sup>2</sup> See Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver's Troubles, Or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968) 148-161.

<sup>3</sup> Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), 259; and Gawande, *The Checklist Manifesto* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).

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America's role in the world, which deserve close study. A partial list includes his Nobel speech, his Cairo speech, his West Point speeches, his speeches before the UN General Assembly, his last State of the Union address, and his Selma speech on American exceptionalism. The problem, however, was that these words, no matter how carefully-crafted and eloquent, always got lost in the poisonous political debate over foreign policy that grew only more toxic during the Obama years.

Too often, Obama was made into a cartoon—as the weak-kneed second coming of Jimmy Carter (or even Michael Dukakis) who did not believe in U.S. leadership, basically screwed everything up, and let America's enemies get the best of it, was unwilling to use force or strengthen military power, and forswore American exceptionalism (here again, Kaufman's response provides a case study). It is common to caricature a president—after all, too many critics dismissed George W. Bush as just a callow cowboy, or thought the Iraq War was all about oil. Yet in the current debate, something far more corrosive is at work.

In *The Long Game* I described the ills of the “foreign policy breakdown”—a concept borrowed from a prescient book by I.M. Destler, Leslie Gelb, and Anthony Lake written over thirty years ago<sup>4</sup>—in which a politicized foreign policy debate, amplified by an increasingly ravenous media pushing opinion over fact, makes it nearly impossible to fashion a strategic approach that is coherent, consistent, and necessary to meet the challenges of the future. If anything, the attributes of the breakdown have become more troubling.

When the *The Long Game* was published in the summer of 2016, the world was shocked that Donald Trump had become the Republican nominee for president, and the prospect that he would actually get elected was so terrifying that few believed it possible (I include myself among the disbelieving). Now Trump is in the White House, and from the perspective of the fall of 2017, my original concerns about the “foreign policy breakdown” seem tame, even quaint. The problem is much deeper than just something that contorts the debate about America's role in the world—it is a cancer that threatens the future of American democracy itself.

Once again, the parallels between Eisenhower and Obama are telling. Both leaders left power proud of their accomplishments, if frustrated by being underappreciated. Both were deeply worried about the state of America's politics and the fate of its democracy. And both have legacies that will forever be twinned to slash-and-burn demagogues who also defined their eras, McCarthy and Trump.

Eisenhower famously left office in January 1961 warning of the “unwarranted influence” of the military-industrial complex and its powers to distort policy, calling for “an alert and knowledgeable citizenry” to “never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes.” Fifty-six years later, Obama departed the White House warning of a similar ill—what he described in his own farewell address as the “rise of naked partisanship, increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste”—which is a kind of media-political-industrial-complex that exerts an influence over the making of national policy that can be similarly damaging. The answer, Obama said, is never to take democracy for granted and for all to accept the “responsibility of citizenship.” I think Eisenhower would agree.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Our Own Worst Enemy: The Unmaking of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> See Derek Chollet, “Obama and Eisenhower: Two Legacies in Arms,” *Defense One*, 12 January 2017.

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As president, Obama was fundamentally optimistic about the U.S. role in the world. He believed in the power of America as a force for good, in the strength and wisdom of the American people, and in the arc of history toward progress. He saw America as a big, boisterous country that gets it right more often than wrong, that thrives on potential, and strives to create a union—and a world—that is ever more perfect. Yet, as I described in the book, the dynamic between the hope of the long game and America's democratic breakdown was the defining struggle of Obama's presidency—one he could never resolve.